

PATRICK PASTURE & JOHAN VERBERCKMOES (ED.)

**«Working-Class Internationalism and the Appeal of
National Identity : Historical Debates and Current
Perspectives on Western Europe»**

Berg, Oxford/New York, 1998, vii + 263 p.

This collection stems from a 1995 conference held at Leuven on “Nationalist and Regionalist Dilemmas for Collective Action”, and it should be noted that this gives a far more accurate description of the book’s contents than the title under which it has actually appeared. For while there is a great deal here about the appeal of nationalism to labour movements, there is hardly anything on working class internationalism. This is symptomatic of the problems that bedevil a volume in which the grandiose ‘revisionist’ ambitions of the editors consistently outrun the more modest – if worthwhile – efforts of their contributors. Pasture and Verberckmoes set their stall out clearly in their introduction when they proclaim that : “The accepted wisdom about nationalism and the labour movement being irreconcilably opposed will be thoroughly overturned” (p. 24). Yet it is far from clear who still adheres to such a view, and surely ever since the devastating events of the summer of 1914 few have doubted that, in the final analysis, working class patriotism and sense of national identity will win out over internationalism. The book’s argu-

ment seems to be that it is permissible for labour movements to identify fully with national and regional (as well as religious and ethnic) identities: to paraphrase Sir William Harcourt's famous dictum of 1888 in relation to socialism, the editors seem to be saying that "we are all Austro-Marxists now".

The book is poorly focused as a collection of essays, and it is far from clear why these particular topics have been chosen. In addition to an introduction that deals with the theoretical context, there are eight other chapters. Six represent case studies of specific regions where labour movements have faced a particular challenge from nationalism or regionalism – the Basque country, Catalonia, Belgium, northern Italy and Northern Ireland (for which, intriguingly, there are two separate chapters). These chapters offer generally helpful and objective histories, and they make for good concise introductions to the specific subjects (each chapter being supported by a bibliography). However, one has the feeling that some of the chapters have particular points to prove. Christopher Norton's chapter on Northern Ireland (the weaker of the two) defends the trade unions from the charge of sectarianism, while Patrick Pasture is equally ready to defend Belgian Catholic workers from any suggestion of sympathy for the authoritarian right in inter-war Europe. Some interesting points do emerge from the opening chapters, such as the contrast between the Basque country, where nationalist trade unions have flourished, and Catalonia, where they have not. But how representative are these five case studies, each of which deals with notoriously conflict-ridden societies ?

Why, for instance, are there two chapters on Northern Ireland while Scotland, where the national question has not proved particularly problematic for the labour movement, is not covered ? One would also like to see some coverage of larger national units – how, for instance, have the national trade union movements in France and Spain coped with those countries' growing regionalisation, and how has the federal state affected the cohesion of the labour movement in post-war Germany ?

Sitting rather uneasily with the previous chapters, the final two offer a detailed study of the response of the Austrian trade unions to EU membership (unfortunately we are told that a companion chapter on Swedish unions and the EU had to be omitted), and an interesting survey by Jelle Visser of the "Europeanisation" of the trade unions. Visser's conclusion is that EMU does not necessitate Europe-wide collective bargaining any more than the Single Market did before it. But he readily admits that if he is wrong – and others have argued conversely – "then the unions are indeed in deep trouble" as "there is no chance of Europe-wide collective bargaining in the near future" (p. 251). Pasture and Verberckmoes ignore this word of warning in their introductory precis of Visser's essay, but perhaps it should be taken more seriously. Could it be that in the next century European labour movements should not so much be discovering nationalism, as this collection seems to suggest, but rather be rediscovering their internationalism within a European and global context ?

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